

APPENDIX F

STIRLING AVENUE MENNONITE CHURCH INC. SAFE CHURCH SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Social networking sites, on-the-spot communication devices and email are an integral part of our society and culture now. In our faith community, they can enhance communication, faith sharing and deepen relationships. The following recommended practices and guidelines apply commonly accepted principles of healthy boundaries and safe church to the virtual world of digital networking and communication.

Commonly Accepted Principles of Healthy Boundaries and Safe Church

- Adults have more power than Children and Youth.
- Clergy have more power than people with whom they have a pastoral relationship.
- The mutuality of friendship cannot exist when there is a disparity of power.
- Two Unrelated Adults must be able to maintain visual contact with each other any time they engage in ministry with Children or Youth.
- Windows in doors allow transparency of interactions with Children, Youth and Adults who may be Vulnerable.

General Information about Digital Communications

- All communication sent digitally (e.g. email, social networking sites, notes or posts, texting) is NOT CONFIDENTIAL and may be shared or reposted to others beyond our control.
- Interactions in the virtual world need to be transparent, as a window in the door provides transparency in the physical world.
- In the virtual world, healthy boundaries and safe church practices must be adhered to as they are in the physical world.
- Laws regarding mandated reporting of suspected abuse/neglect/exploitation of Children, Youth, elders and Vulnerable Adults apply in the virtual world as they do in the physical world.

Social Networking Sites Relationships Adults working with Children and Youth are strongly encouraged to set very **stringent privacy settings** on any social networking profile. Bear in mind that the content posted to a public profile can be viewed by anyone without your consent. Individual personal profiles are to be used to interact with real friends, family and peers. Adults should not initiate social media contact with Children or Youth. Youth may not be able to decline such requests due to the disparity of power between Youth and Adults. Youth may initiate social media contact and Adults should discern the level of contact they want to maintain with Youth prior to responding to these requests.

- Any material on any site (whether affiliated with Stirling or not) that **raises suspicion** that a Child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should be immediately reported to Family and Children’s Services or the Police—if desired, in consultation with a Pastor—as per Section M (Protocol and Guidelines for Reporting Suspicion of Child Abuse) in this policy. If the material is on a Stirling affiliated site, that material should be documented for Stirling’s records and then removed from the site after consultation with Family and Children’s Services and/or police.
- **Inappropriate material that does not raise suspicion** that a Child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should immediately be removed from the site.
- Any **content that details inappropriate behaviour** (outside of the bounds of the established behavioural covenant) during a Stirling sponsored event or activity should be addressed by Adult Youth leaders and parents/guardians.
- Social networking groups for Youth should be **open to parents/guardians of current members**.
- **Unsupervised internet access** by Children and Youth during Stirling-sponsored events should not be allowed.
- **Behavioural covenants** should be created to govern what content is appropriate and inappropriate for any social media group created on behalf of Stirling.

Recommendations for Behavioural Covenants

- Covenants should acknowledge that materials posted on Stirling affiliated sites (and/or group pages) are **NOT CONFIDENTIAL**.
- Covenants should acknowledge that **content deemed inappropriate will be removed** from the site or group page.
- Covenants for Stirling-related social media groups should address the following:
 - Appropriate **language**
 - **Eligibility of membership** to join a social networking group. Things to consider include whether you have to be part of the congregation and whether there are age requirements/restrictions for participation.
 - Loss of eligibility of membership and **removal from the social networking group**. Consider how and when members will be removed from the group due to moving away, leaving the faith community, becoming too old for youth group, pastors leaving to minister elsewhere or exclusion from ministry positions for other reasons.
 - Who, how and when may **photos be tagged** (members identified by name; for example, individuals may tag themselves in photos but should not tag others)
 - Appropriate and inappropriate **behaviour of members** (bullying, pictures that depict abuse, violence, sexual acts, etc.) and the consequence for inappropriate behaviour.
 - **Compliance with mandated reporting laws** regarding suspected abuse.

Recommendations for Video Chats, Blogs or Video Blogs

- Adults should **refrain from initiating text or video chats** with Youth
- Participants in a video chat or blog should **consider what will be shown** in the video such as their surroundings, their clothing/state of dress, etc.
- All **transcripts of on-line video chats, blogs or video blogs** should be saved when possible.
- All Pastors and other Adults engaged in ministry with Youth should **consider the content** and nature of any post that will be read by or visible to Youth. Your voice is often considered the voice of the church, even when Youth are not your intended audience.

Recommendations for Publishing/Posting Content

- Stirling volunteers and employees working with Children and Youth should take care to **secure signed Media Release forms** from Adults and guardians of minor Children who will or may participate in activities that may be photographed or videoed for distribution.
- Photos published on church sponsored sites/publications or displayed in the church, should **not include name or contact** information for Children or Youth.

Recommendations for Use of Email/Instant Messaging

- Email can be an appropriate and effective means of **communicating basic factual** information (e.g. time of event, agenda for meeting, text of a document). Email is **not an appropriate communication method** for matters that are pastorally or legally sensitive, emotionally charged or require extensive conversation.
- If an email message is **longer than a couple of sentences**, then the matter might more properly be addressed via live conversation.
- **Humour and sarcasm** can be easily misinterpreted in an email.
- All email users should **take a moment** to consider the ramifications of their message before clicking on the “send” or “reply to all” button.
- **Emails to Junior or Senior Youth** should be copied to a Parent/Guardian and/or a Stirling leader. Content should be brief and pertain to the logistical details of connecting. Prior written permission (signed paper, or email reply by Parent/Guardian) to connect in this way is required.
- Stirling employees and Volunteers may use **text messaging** to communicate with Junior or Senior Youth, if and only if, they have the formal written consent or parents/guardians. Content should be brief and pertain to the logistical details of connecting (e.g. about attending an event or requiring transportation).
- **Pastoral care or counselling** should never be done through text messaging.

Adapted from guidelines of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, <https://www.episcopalct.org/Find-Resources/General-Parish-Operations/Safe-Church-Resources/Guidelines-for-Social-Media/> Used with permission. Excerpts from “Social Media for Christian Ministry: Getting Online and Keeping Out of Court,” Kenneth A. Hall, *The Advantage*, September 2012.